How to Unschool Yourself and Your Children

Three Parts: Learning About Unschooling Doing Unschooling Reading While Unschooling

Unschooling is a learning method that gives greater freedom and allows the learner to have greater control over their learning curriculum, with rigid rules that tend to be more focused on teaching children obedience than encouraging their natural interest.[1]

Part 1 Learning About Unschooling

1 **Discover unschooling.** Unschooling allows a child to learn in their own, individual way, using their natural curiosity and interests. Instead of sitting in a classroom for eight hours a day they are able to have interactive projects and constant learning opportunities.[2]

- Unschooling is incredibly adaptive, as it changes and moves with the child and goes at the child's pace. It teaches children that learning happens constantly, not within a rigid structure of 'facts' and tests, but in a natural, non-stressful environment. There is no doing school since you are learning all the time.
- Giving children the opportunity and the resources for learning on their own gives them greater independence and a greater ability to take charge for themselves and to make decisions for themselves.
- Regular public school tends to be a space more for showing off and for artificial boundaries drawn based on class, race, and gender that perpetuate in children behaviors and boundaries which are already problematic in the wider culture. Most children learn little more than how to work within a system that does not even treat them as people (many students have stories about cheating on tests, lying to avoid getting in trouble, and so on).[3]

2 **Take charge of learning.** Unschooling means that both the parent(s) and the child have to take charge of learning. This does not mean that the parent is responsible for becoming the 'teacher,' so to speak, but to be an active, participant in their child's learning.[4]

- This means doing interesting projects, looking up answers to a child's questions with the child (like: why is the sky blue?).
- There are a variety of good books and helpful spaces for parents who are unschooling their children, that can help give them ideas and deal with difficult times. Books like John Holt's *Teach Your Own*[5] or Grace Llewellyn's *The Teenage Liberation Handbook*[6]. Or check out the Self Made Scholar's unschooling reading list.[7]

3 **Learn all the time.** Unschooling means constant learning. It sounds tiring, but really all that means is rather than setting aside a specific time to sit down to memorize some facts, your child is constantly being exposed to the world and the learning opportunities it provides.

- You will start to figure out both how you, and your child, learn things and it will take some trial and error to find the most useful ways for your child to learn, since there is no one right way to learn.

4 **Learn about unschooling and college opportunities.** You may think that a child who is being unschooled won't get into college (and that the same problem applies to homeschooled children as well), but this is actually not true. Of course, not everyone wants or needs to go to college, but many do.[8]

- Universities and colleges like Harvard, MIT, Duke, Yale, and Stanford are actually actively looking for students who have had alternate learning experiences, because those types of students tend to earn more credits than regular students and tend to do better, since they have more often been exposed to self-motivated learning.
- Many colleges have adjusted their admissions policies so that it is easier for these types of students to apply.
- The most important things to do if you're an unschooler who wants to go to college are to keep good records of your work, make sure you know and meet the deadlines for things like the SAT and submitting applications, and

focus on your application essay.

Part 2 Doing Unschooling

1 **Pursue a child's interest.** The point of unschooling is to focus on the child's learning and where that interest takes them. It can take awhile for them to want to do reading or mathematics, but if they are allowed to work at their own pace they are more likely to learn for themselves and the retain that information.[9]

- Encourage their natural interest in things. If they show an interest in cooking, find some fun cooking experiments and try them together, or let the child try them on their own. Cooking can teach all kinds of things, like mathematics (with fractions and amounts) as well as being a practical skill.
- If your child likes to make up stories, do creative writing projects and talk about the different characters in their own games and in the stories that they (and you) might be reading. They'll learn about characterization, about writing skills and they'll be having fun.
- If they want to learn more intensively about a subject you don't know about, there are some really good free online courses that they can participate in, like Khan Academy[10] and the Self Made Scholar.[11] You can also find free online college courses on the Open Culture database.[12]

2 **Use creative opportunities for learning.** This is one of the most fun and exciting parts about unschooling. You and your child get to have lots of different, creative opportunities to learn about the world.

- Check the museums in your area. Many museums have days where they are free, or are free for children and it can be a fun outing. Also, many of the bigger museums have their catalog online, so even if you can't physically go to a museum, you can still look at amazing and interesting things.
- Libraries are great learning resources. They often have projects going on and reading groups and lectures, beyond simply having a lot of interesting books! Check out your library's events calendar to see what's happening and talk to your child about what they might be interested in.
- If your child is interested in something and you know someone who has the right skills, see if you can have your child learn from them for a day, or a week, or even a couple times a month. This could be anything from a chef, to a chemistry professor, to an archaeologist. Not only will this provide the child with new knowledge it's also a great way for them to see other viewpoints and to be more involved in the adult world.[13]

3 **Use games and fun projects as learning tools.** Since you'll be looking for lots of fun and creative ways to learn, using different games and projects can be a great way to help facilitate learning.

- Discover the what the ecosystem is like in your area. For example, if you live near a the ocean, learn about marine animals and different kinds of water ecosystems. If you can, take a trip to them beach to look for shells and sea creatures.
- If you can get a hold of a telescope, or make one, you can use that to look at the night sky and talk about the stars. You can even use this as a way to talk about mythology using the constellations as a jumping off point.
- Using a microscope, examine dirt from your backyard and from the park and compare them. Talk about why there are differences in the soils and what could cause them.

4 **Answer questions.** It is incredibly important that you take the time to answer questions with your child. You don't have to be an expert in every subject, but when they ask a question, sit down with them to find out the answer.

- You can even point them in the direction of an encyclopedia (or the internet) and tell them to look it up and then tell you. If they can't figure out in ten minutes, work with them to find the answer.
- If there is no answer, or no one right answer, you can discuss why that is and talk about ways of trying to figure the answer out for yourselves. For instance, you can talk about what gravity is and how no one knows the exact cause. You could even do experiments with gravity (since, who doesn't love throwing things off a high building).

5 **"Deschool."** Sometimes you have to deschool before you unschool. This is often especially important if your child has been in the public school system for a while. Deschooling means giving them a break, for a few weeks or even a month, to get them out of the schooling mindset.

- Once they've gotten into a more relaxed rhythm, talk with them about what they want to learn and how they'd like to learn it. They don't have to have anything concrete at that moment, it will simply introduce the idea again.

6 **Be patient.** You probably won't see the effects of unschooling immediately. Sometimes children can be recalcitrant and not want to learn anything, especially if they've been in the public school system for awhile. That is okay. It can take time to adjust to a new system and to rediscover their natural curiosity.

- You will have to trust your child to take control of their learning. Children are naturally interested in the world and curious about things. Even if it takes time, they will start learning, because they won't be able to help themselves.
- Putting pressure on children to learn can make them anxious and less likely to learn (as often happens in school). Keeping learning stress-free and enjoyable will keep them much more likely to learn for themselves.

Part 3 Reading While Unschooling

1 **Recognize there is no "correct" reading age.** For parents considering unschooling, the problem of reading can seem like a huge one. Reading is so often equated with intelligence. The usual schooling ideas about when children should be reading are, more or less, made up, however. Children learn to read when they want to.[14]

2 **Enjoy teaching.** Make reading simple, like a serious (not silly) but desirable game and very easy. When children are "coached" (not coaxed, not pressured) for playing reading, they tend to have a more consistently positive attitude towards reading. This makes it easier for them to learn to read when they choose to "play" reading.

3 **Play word search:** Show them common words such as "on/off" on light switches (spell them aloud too as "o-n on", and "o-f-f off", etc.). Find "push/pull, go/stop, in/out" on business doors and such, one syllable, and add a few *important, two-syllable words* like "EXIT" and "ENTER" which are found. At home, show them each individual letter and mainly teach "sounds" of letters, not the names only. A is the name, but "a, eh, ah" are some of its sounds, as if it can make cute sounds.

- Studies have found that unschooling students tend to go from non-reading to fluent in reading very quickly. So whether your child is four or older, each will learn to read when it's best for them.

4 **Ease into it:** avoid making your child read anything. The worst thing you can do is pressure your child into hating reading. That "backfires" and make them less inclined towards reading. When a child is under stress one is much less likely to accept learning quickly and easily. In fact, some studies have shown that children who have difficulty (or shame) in reading are more likely to act out behavior-wise in school, instead of learning happily.

- For example, don't make a young child write out lists of words they need to learn. You'll find that your child will be less likely to want to learn the words, than if they had been left alone to learn on their own. Suggest sounding-out the letters to get new words such as "c-a-t, cuh eh tuh", "ceht"; "c-a-t cat"! Don't force phonics as a study on them as lessons but let the child have their *ah-hah moments, to feel the joy* of getting a word or an idea. If the child tries to write, be satisfied that it is crooked and spelled oddly: Say, "Now you're getting it. Keep it up!"

5 **Show how much you value reading.** By having reading as something that is apart of your daily life, you'll show your child how important it is. You don't have to talk about reading every second of the day, but have books around the house, talk about books that you're reading with your child.

- Ask your child what books they enjoy most, and make sure to have lots of those types of books around (either from a bookstore, or by going to the library and picking them out with your child).
- Don't do all the reading for them. While it is important to help out your child when they ask for it, by not always doing the reading for them they will realize they importance of learning to read. So, for example, if you're reading a story for them, go at the pace that works for your schedule. If they want to get the story more quickly, they'll need to learn to read it on their own.

6 **Encourage mixed-age interaction.** Children tend to learn better when they're exposed to people of all different age groups, with readers and non-readers mixed together. This can be some sort of mixed-age children's group, or reading at home with family.

- Children often learn reading through games between readers and non-readers. There are lots of games that require reading comprehension and the readers interpret for the non-readers. The non-readers begin to learn words as they play.
- Some ideas for a family mixed-age interaction might be watching t.v. with the captions on so the non-readers start to identify words and letters, having shared reading time where the whole family gets to read out loud. A nightly reading where parents or older siblings read to the non-reader.

7 **Learn through writing.** A lot of times children learn to read, because they learn to write. They often learn to write because they're writing the things that interest them: captions to go along with pictures they draw, stories of their own, notes for their family members.

- Help your child spell things when they ask you for help. Otherwise, it's best to let them sort out language on their own. Don't worry, they will learn to spell properly, even if it takes them some time.

8 **Listen to your child.** These steps are really only suggestions for things that might help your child learn to read. The person who knows your child's learning style best is your child. Pay attention to how they are learning things and what they want to do. After all, unschooling is about letting you child direct their own learning.

Tips

- If you think your child needs to be around other children more, see if they'd like to do sports (like soccer) or if they want to join a club in the community.
- There are unschooling 'schools' that you can send your child to. If you work during the day it might be useful to check around in your area and see if you can find one.
- Find other people who think similarly, and collaborate with them. It can be incredibly helpful to have a community of people who are supportive and with whom you can exchange ideas and frustrations. It's also a great way to have fellow children for your child to interact with.
- You can use places like the Zinn Education Project[15] to help with unschooling learning ideas for history.

Warnings

- Not everyone benefits from no structure. You'll have to check in with your child on what they feel is working best for them.

Sources and Citations

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2. http://zenhabits.net/unschool/
3. http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/freedom-learn/201309/schools-are-good-showing-not-learning

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